

Remembering Austin is remembering Sue McBee

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When we remember Austin henceforth, we should also remember Sue Brandt McBee.

Though her eyesight was failing at the end, McBee maintained a magnificent vision of the city's past and how the past fit with its future.

Graduating from the University of Texas in 1943, McBee eventually became a huge presence in Austin's social scene. But she was no mere social butterfly. McBee was also a philanthropist and patron of the arts and is best known for preserving Austin's past.

She dedicated a lot of time, money and effort to preserving the city's history but never at the cost of its present and future. The ability to maintain that sort of simultaneous focus is a quality McBee possessed and that we should emulate now that she's gone.

McBee died last week at the age of 87 and will be remembered at a private burial in the State Cemetery today and later at a memorial service at the Headliners Club — another institution to which McBee was passionately dedicated. Her husband, Frank McBee, one of the founders of Tracor, was the club's longtime board chairman. He died in 2000.

Incoming presidents of the club were often advised that they would do just fine as long as they followed the guidance of the two Sues: McBee and Sue Meller, Headliners managing director.

It was good advice but unnecessary to anyone who witnessed the deference McBee was accorded whenever she walked into the place. Even those with minimal powers of observation could tell McBee had a lot of clout. Whether at the Headliners or any place she might visit, McBee carried herself with a quiet confidence and gentle authority.

She was born in 1923 in Hamburg, Germany, but carried the love for her adopted country and her adopted city on her sleeve. She wrote a column about Austin's past in the *American-Statesman* in the 1980s, and if you were around then, you probably remember the tray of historical goodies she offered in that weekly commentary.

She was the driving force behind the founding of the Austin History Center. It was a magnificent gift to a city that has been in love with itself since its founding in 1838. McBee fanned those flames of passion by keeping that past alive.

Her newspaper writing reflected a meat-and-potatoes journalism style, but it was served with flair. Her writing had some of the same sparkle she had her in eyes.

To read her short profile of Decherd H. Turner, then-director of the Humanities Research Center, published in the January 1982 edition of *The Alcalde*, a University of Texas alumni publication, is to read a textbook example of efficient prose. It's short, but every word counts. "Before his birth, his Irish Protestant mother was informed by a soothsayer that her imminent son would be forever surrounded by books" is how she led the short but engaging and informative piece.

She liked people and made that obvious with her ability to converse easily with anyone at any social or economic level.

It is difficult to imagine an Austin with its cheerleader in chief and unofficial historian gone.

It's a pretty safe bet that Sue Brandt McBee wouldn't want that history to end with her. She would want somebody to pick up that torch and carry it as elegantly and proudly as she did. There's so much more history to tell, after all.